

# **The Middle East in the Aftermath of the Gulf War**

**Précis of a Colloquium**

---

**Participants:**

**Elie Kedourie  
Martin Kramer  
Itamar Rabinovich  
Harvey Sicherman  
Shimon Shamir  
Asher Susser**

---



**The Yona and Dina Ettinger Chair  
in the Contemporary History  
of the Middle East**

**The Moshe Dayan Center  
for Middle Eastern  
and African Studies**

**TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY**

# The Prospects of Islamic Revival

Martin Kramer

---

A month ago, the *Foreign Report* of *The Economist* published an item titled "The Islamic Wave Recedes," which claimed that the militant Islamic wave which had begun to threaten secular governments throughout the Arab world and alarm the West had now begun to recede. The article pointed out that the failure of the Islamic parties to perform economic miracles had cost them popular support. It also argued that Iran had lost interest in exporting the revolution to Arab lands and that Saudi Arabia had cut off money to Islamic movements that had supported Iraq. Similarly, it suggested that disillusionment with Saddam had carried over to disillusionment with the Islamic parties. "Islamic fundamentalists have lost an opportunity to reap the advantage," the article concluded.

If this assessment of Islam is right, and if the Islamic wave is about to recede, can it be for the reasons adduced? To provide an answer, I want to question the three assumptions behind the idea of the receding wave. First, have Islamic parties disappointed their followers for failing to perform miracles, economic or otherwise? Second, have states like Iran and Saudi Arabia really lost interest in the promotion of Islamic movements elsewhere? And last, has Islamic fundamentalism indeed been discredited by its association with Saddam Husayn?

First, as to whether Islamic parties have disappointed their followers by failing to perform miracles, let us specify what parties we are talking about. In the last few years, a number of Islamic movements in the Arab world have shifted course. In the early

1980s many of them had taken up revolutionary politics. They tried to emulate the success of Iran's revolution, sometimes by acts of violence which were meant to promote still further acts of violence, culminating in revolution. But the second Islamic revolution never came. The masses did not respond. Moreover, wherever Islamic revolution threatened, the secret police imprisoned, killed or exiled the activists. Beyond Iran, Islam failed to capture the political center or establish itself in power. After a decade of trial and error, the concept of seizing power through revolution was largely discarded.

While entrenched regimes know how to put down violent Jihad cells, they do not know how to put down the broader demand for political participation, a demand that has been created in some Arab countries by domestic crisis. Regimes have tried to contain discontent by introducing limited measures of what they call democratization. Islamic movements, instead of trying to force back-door revolution, are now trying to walk through the open front door of democracy.

I will leave aside the question of whether or not these movements are committed to democratic values. The fact is that for now, they are seeking the status of legal political parties to allow them full participation in elections at every level, national and local. During the past three years they have made some remarkable showings wherever they have been legalized, for example in the elections to the Egyptian National Assembly in 1987, in the municipal elections in Israel in 1989 and in the elections for Tunisia's Chamber of Deputies, also in 1989. Most importantly, in 1989 the Islamic fundamentalists captured 40% of the seats in the Lower House of Jordan's National Assembly, and in 1990, in Algeria's municipal and provincial elections, the Islamic party beat the ruling FLN, capturing some 55% of the vote.

These are impressive showings, but they are not electoral triumphs. In no instance has national power been shifted to

Islamic fundamentalists as a result of elections, for the electoral rules favor the ruling regimes. Islamic parties are allowed to advance only so far before they encounter barriers erected by threatened regimes. This is beginning to produce electoral boycotts by Islamic parties, most recently in Egypt and Tunisia. Therefore, the Islamic parties have not had the opportunity to succeed or fail. Islam still remains an untried solution throughout the Arab world.

Second, have states like Iran and Saudi Arabia lost interest in the promotion of Islamic movements elsewhere? The support of Iran and Saudi Arabia has sometimes been important to the growth of Islamic movements throughout the Arab world — Iran in the Shi'ite realm and Saudi Arabia in the Sunni. The regimes of these two countries define their very legitimacy in Islamic terms, and during the 1980s they were involved in a desperate competition over the right to define the one true Islam, building up far-flung networks of influence. In the last year or so it is true that there has been a lessening of Saudi-Iranian competition, and if this diminished tension is transformed over the longer term into a full reconciliation, then the need of both states to find and fund external recognition of their Islamic credentials will diminish.

But that point has not been reached yet, and there is ample evidence that both Iran and Saudi Arabia are determined to maintain close to their present levels of support for foreign Muslim clients. Thus, Iran continues to fund and nurture Hizballah in Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia is still financing its far-flung network of clients. While some Islamic movements have been cut off by the Saudis for their decision to support Saddam Husayn in the recent war, many of these movements hedged their Gulf bets and are well positioned to make up with the Saudis, if they have not done so already.

In any event, the Islamic wave was never a product of direct Iranian and Saudi support. It emerged from deep-seated grievances

that fed a populist groundswell. The Islamic movements feel increasingly self-sufficient, which is why, for instance, some of them in Algeria and Jordan felt confident enough to cut the cord and support Saddam Husayn. Where Iran and Saudi Arabia have cut back on their support of Islamic movements, the populist appeal of these movements has not been diminished.

Last, has Islamic fundamentalism been discredited by its association with Saddam Husayn? From the beginning of the crisis, Iraq cloaked its actions in Islamic garb, repeatedly calling upon the Muslims to raise the standard of Jihad. The response of Muslim opinion to the opposing claims of Iraq and Saudi Arabia varied widely. Street demonstrations created an impression that the sentiment of Islam, or at least of Islamic fundamentalism, was solidly behind Saddam Husayn. But, in fact, the leadership of several of the Islamic movements was rather torn by the stark choice forced upon it by this crisis. There was considerable debate within Islamic movements over the question of whether Saddam was a Saladin or a charlatan, with a wide range of opinion in between. In the first stage, the leaders of the fundamentalist movements played straight to the sentiment in the street, venting resentment against the West. The support of Islamic movements for Saddam seemed unanimous. But then a new note began to creep in. Saddam did not have any Islamic credentials; more and more Islamic leaders began to express reservations about the conduct of Iraq's occupation; and there was an awareness that one day the crisis would be over and they might want to rebuild bridges to the rich Saudis and the restored Kuwaitis.

The leaders of the Islamic movements began to hedge their bets. One method was mediation. Several of the leaders began to shuttle back and forth between Baghdad and Riyadh, not so much out of a conviction that they would achieve peace, but to keep open their lines of communication to the Saudis. Other Islamic movements either split or feigned splits, with one leader taking



Iraq's side and another taking Saudi Arabia's. Two examples are the Tunisian movement and the Egyptian Muslim Brethren.

Some Islamic movements actually tilted toward Kuwait. Outside the Arab world, the most famous example was the Afghan Mujahidin. Within the Arab world, the best example was the homegrown Hamas, which issued harsh anti-US statements in the first days of the crisis, but could not compete with PLO Chairman Yasir 'Arafat's close personal identification with Saddam. Furthermore, it had enjoyed considerable financial support for Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Hamas also saw an opportunity to gain support from the Palestinians in the Gulf by siding with the anticipated winners, and it gradually shifted to silent support of Kuwait.

It seems fair to say that the leaders of the Islamic movements hedged their Gulf bets as best they could in the atmosphere of passionate anti-Americanism that swept over their followers. I am sure many of them are negotiating their relationship with the Gulf Arabs right now. The two movements which were most identified with Iraq, the Jordanian and Algerian Islamic movements, will probably be shunned by Saudi Arabia for some time to come, but I rather doubt that Saddam's defeat has discredited them domestically. The Islamic movements in both countries were not very far ahead of the regimes themselves in their professions of support for Saddam.

I have raised questions about the assumptions behind the receding wave of Islam. I will go one step further: In the longer term, the effects of the war may actually work to strengthen the appeal of Islam. The causes of the revival are rooted in a barely suppressed rage against the moral, political, and economic state of the Islamic world, and that state has not been improved by the war. The economies of the region are in a shambles, the war cost the Arab world hundreds of billions of dollars, there are new refugees and there are new resentments. Conflicts still abound. At

the same time, the map of the region has not changed. Every regime that was in place on 1 August is in place today, including President Saddam Husayn's and the Emir of Kuwait's. It is the old order that feeds the rage, which the Islamic revival rose to overturn. It is difficult to see why disillusionment with this situation should settle upon Islam. The outcome of the recent war is too ambiguous, both militarily and morally, to allow us the comfort of thinking that we live in a new Middle East freed of the passions that stir up fundamentalism.